

## **PUBLIC LIBRARIES: CELEBRATING DIVERSITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The origin of Public libraries is grounded in equity and the advancement or enrichment of the individual. The original intention was to reduce the class divide in society and offer an equitable platform to promote values of self help to enable, facilitate and empower individuals and communities economically, socially and politically. The public library system provides access to information and community facilities for marginalized groups in populations, including low socio economic status (SES) families, the aged, people with special needs and ethnic minorities. Poor language skills in the dominant language, inadequate education, poor finances, and lack of access to computer technologies and relevant skills, hinder access to information, community facilities and life opportunities. In cases where formal education is lacking or even absent, the public library is positioned to function as an informal education conduit for facilitating lifelong learning. Strategically located in both urban and rural population centres, the seventeen hundred (1700) public libraries that make up the Australian public library network provide a viable infrastructure to enable equity of access to information, social inclusion and to influence the development of social capital in multicultural Australia. This paper will examine the research and current state of play in Australian public libraries and investigate the notion that public libraries have a role in facilitating community building for non-English speaking ethnic groups. It is part of a much larger PhD study investigating opportunities for building sustainable communities and nation building for a multicultural Australia.*

**KEYWORDS:** *public libraries, community building, multiculturalism, social cohesion*

## INTRODUCTION

The clamour for land and power is a tradition handed down from the early days of civilisation and inherent differences amongst ethnic and cultural groups have resulted in major conflicts throughout history. These conflicts have led to mass migrations of people, the most recent being the Second World War and to a lesser extent the wars in Africa and the Middle East. While cannons and gunpowder were used to resolve earlier ethnic issues, the current approach is through government policy, diplomacy and negotiation between nations. Current migrant population trends in Australia indicate an increasing presence of ethnic communities and minority groups which do not have English as the dominant language or in some cases, even as a second language. While prudent governance encompasses various aspects of multiculturalism (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), the public library under the administration of local governments, has the potential to be a cross-cultural meeting place, because it is 'embedded in the local community with links to all sectors of activity' (Audunson, 2005). The public library is strategically placed to promote democratic and social values (Audunson, 2005) and to build a sense of community and connectedness, particularly for minority social groups which may be operating on the fringes of society because they are disadvantaged. This upsurge of new circumstances represents a change in role for public libraries and challenges the traditional idea that they are only repositories of information rather than social hubs of the community (Usherwood, 2007).

Thus redefining Australian public library services to include a multicultural dimension that enables the principles of equity and builds bridges to create sustainable, integrated communities is an essential component for their legitimacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This next section examines the Strategic Directions for public library policy.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Since the Australian public library system has its roots in the British library system it generally caters for English speakers and has been founded on Anglo Saxon cultural traditions. Although initiatives to address the needs of minority users of public library facilities across Australia exist, they are generally isolated and localized programs which have evolved as a response to local needs. The only national program in this review so far is the My Language Project which does not appear to be easily accessible at the local public library level. The fact that this program does not appear to have been picked up

and disseminated by local public libraries indicates that service delivery and information channels from some state libraries down to local public libraries where this service would be most valuable, has not occurred. The My Language Web portal is a joint partnership between the State & Territory Libraries of New South Wales(NSW), Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia(WA), Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory (My Language Consortium, 2010). The portal provides links to support services, best practice community programs, and a multilingual links page for users. While some state libraries offer a translation service (State Library Western Australia) on the front page of the website, the initial page is in English, the service is located at the very bottom of the page, and there is no explanation or indication that the link leads to a multilingual resource/tool. Links to the My Language portal and resources are not obvious and a large component of the My Language website is also available only in English. While the My Language Web portal has been a national collaboration, its lack of promotion means that service delivery to non –English speaking groups is limited.

In the case of minority users, community services and access to essential information is a vital component to enable integration into new social environments. It is important therefore, to establish what strategic directions are in place for the provision of ethnic and multicultural services across the public library systems in Australia. In Western Australia State Library of Western Australia (SLWA)'s Strategic Directions sets the framework for the operation of all the public libraries in the State (SLWA, 2009). Sections of this framework relevant to non-English speaking groups include the following.

- Priority Area 1.2: 'the increasingly diverse nature of society in Western Australia and ensuring [the] collection represent this diversity'.
- Priority Area 4.1: 'raising [SLWA's] profile and awareness in the private sector, community groups, government agencies and individuals as a cultural partner for mutual benefit.'
- Priority Area 4.2: 'working with other libraries to promote the role of libraries in democratic societies' (SLWA, 2009).

While SLWA's targets for the twenty-first century aim 'to help people learn, enjoy and play in their own time, in their place, our place so that our communities thrive, flourish and support creative and economic opportunities' (SLWA, 2009), there are no strategic priority areas in the Framework that deal specifically with ethnic and multicultural service provision. These strategic directions guide the current policy and future directions of SLWA and the

232 public libraries in Western Australia. Recent reform workshops in Western Australia have been set up to examine the traditional approaches to service delivery by the SLWA. In 2010 Local Governments in collaboration with SLWA initiated a Strategic Library Partnership Agreement Steering Committee (SLPASC) to 'review public services across the state' and to 'develop a template for public library service agreements', since the current agreements between the Library Board of Western Australia and the local government authorities were signed in 1950s and 1960s and are in dire need of replacement (Western Australia Local Government Authority (WALGA) 2010).

The brief for the SLPASC is to lead and facilitate the development of State and Local Government partnerships for Public library services in WA by developing strategic objectives, drive structural reform process through agreed framework (WALGA, 2010).

In February the SLPASC recommended that demographic factors should not be included in the funding allocation model and stated that, 'special needs funding should be established as a central provision for LOTE, Indigenous and special cases, on a needs basis' (WALGA, 2010. p.4). The workshop recommended that new initiatives for the development of working in partnerships should be established (WALGA, 2010). Hence, in August 2010 the Western Australian State and Local Government Authorities Agreement was signed off by the Premier and included the following terms and conditions:

- increased consultations between State and local governments;
- more meetings and discussions on strategic policies; and
- proposed benchmarks for funding core public library services ( WALGA, 2010. p 4).

While the prospect for addressing current demographic and technological changes appears to be a low priority in the 2010 State and local government discussions on reform for the public library system, the absence of specific mention of increasing numbers in ethnic population or addressing multicultural information needs or ethnic library policies and services and how these services will be addressed operationally is cause for concern in Western Australia.

In Victoria *Standards for Multicultural Public Library Services* were documented in 1982 in recognition of the increase in ethnic diversity in the public library user community. The overarching clause "fair and equitable service by public libraries" to all groups is reflected in later documents and guidelines, including the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)'s *Multicultural Communities: Guidelines for Library Users* (1996). In 2001 the Library Board of Victoria reviewed the 1982 standards because of:

- changes in the diversity of ethnic groups from European to African and middle Eastern migrants;
- increased numbers of new arrivals;
- accountability to local communities and groups; and
- inequitable inclusion of LOTE resources in local collections.

Members of the review committee included library practitioners, Local Government Authority (LGA) staff, personnel from key government agencies such as the Victorian Multicultural Commission which assists new arrivals and ethnic groups and IT service providers. The revised, *Multicultural library service guidelines for Victorian public libraries* purports to address the 'changes to the Victorian local government context, and to incorporate changes in information technology, increased diversity and changing community expectations' (Library Board of Victoria, 2001. p.1.). The Guidelines further extended multicultural service delivery that had been initiated in 1999 by the Open Road Project (State Library of Victoria, 2004-2010) which initially offered links to six major languages including non Roman scripts (Library Board of Victoria, 2001). Currently, the State Library of Victoria is engaged in developing the first *Cultural Diversity Action Plan 2011-13*, which aims for the 'continual development or services, build on established programs, initiate a plan and regular feedback for identifying information needs of diverse communities' ( State Library of Victoria, 2010). In addition, some Local Government Authorities such as Latrobe city are engaged in developing cultural and diversity action plans (Latrobe City Council, 2010) as part of a commitment to build social capital and develop inclusive and harmonious communities.

New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland have addressed multicultural public library services and subsequently reviewed their policies. The Working Group on Multicultural Library Services (NSW) established in 1983 with the vision statement, every public library in NSW will have an excellent resource collection and services that meet needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD), was reviewed as Strategic Plan 2006-2011 by the State Library of NSW ( State Library of NSW, 2006).

The State Library of Queensland's Multicultural services Consultative Committee manages collaborations between public libraries, State Library and ethnic communities by applying the document titled, *Making Libraries Multicultural: Protocol for Consultation* (Library Board of Victoria, 2001).

While Libraries Board of South Australia refers to the *Guidelines for Multicultural Public Library and Information Services* for its library policies (Library Board of Victoria, 2001).

National stakeholders involved in multicultural public library service include, of Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC). The Local Government Authority (LGA) manages the public libraries, thus the 1999, LGA document titled, *Services for All* addresses access and equity so that,

“all residents gain access to services facilities and opportunities provided by Councils, regardless of race, culture, religion or language” (Library Board of Victoria, 2001. p.8).

DIMA’s 1998, *Charter of public service in a culturally diverse society*, highlights seven fundamental issues, namely, access, equity, communication, responsiveness, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency. ).

“The charter emphasis the value building cultural diversity into strategic planning , policy development, budget, and reporting processes engaged in by service providers” (Library Board of Victoria, 2001 p.5).

National Multicultural Advisory Council ( NMAC)provides the multicultural policy for state and federal governments in the 1999 document titled, *Australian multiculturalism for a new century: towards inclusiveness* (Library Board of Victoria, 2001). While library services are not mentioned specifically, equity is subsumed in the above clauses.

In summary, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), *Multicultural communities: guidelines for library service*, states

“that library services to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities should not be seen in isolation or as additional to normal services. They must be seen as integral to any library service...each library service should continuously assess the nature and needs of its community, in consultation with ethnic, linguistic and cultural minority groups, and should base its services upon such assessments and consultations” (Library Board of Victoria, 2001 p.9).

Furthermore, the Multicultural Library Manifesto, a joint document from the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and United Nations (UNESCO) provides a

“guideline for librarians to address cultural and linguistic diversity issues in their work, and guide them in providing library services that serve diverse interests and communities and respect cultural identity and values” (IFLA, 2009). It is apparent that,

“Australia does not have a national policy and there is effectively no engagement by its national government in the development and conditions of public libraries as specified in the UNESCO Manifesto”.

### **A DISCUSSION OF LOCAL INITIATIVES AROUND AUSTRALIA THAT CATER FOR OR HAVE CATERED FOR ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS FOLLOWS.**

Public libraries can create opportunities for community building as they are located in population centres around Australia. The states need to collaborate more, there needs to be advocacy that adopts the Commonwealth approach and translate policy down to the states and the local government. Library officials (Jan Fullerton and Alan Bundy) relentlessly alert the library community for the need of a united voice.

### **POLICY, NATION BUILDING AND MULTICULTURALISM THROUGH STATE PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

Unavoidably, ethnic minority unrest emerges as a consequence of long term benign indifference by the dominant culture. For example, long term oppression and discrimination of South Sudanese by the Khartoum regime resulted in the birth of a new nation on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011 with a promise to find,

“strength in diversity and build institutions that represent the full constellation of its broad geographic and ethnic communities...the basics for any modern, democratic state must be guaranteed: free expression, full political rights, *inclusive institutions that extend benefits to citizens*” (Ki-moon, 2011).

This is an example of current unrest by a mere eight million citizens, it depicts the current euphoria signifying equity and inclusion. Digital access to information educates and empowers, the current Secretary General of the United Nations explained that,

*“ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the international community has increasingly come to recognize the responsibilities of governments to their citizens...the popular uprisings in North Africa and Middle East have shown what can happen when governments are inattentive to the needs of their people” ( Ki-Moon, 2011).*

The cause for unrest on ethnic grounds draws awareness to communities and governments around the world to the inevitable consequences of complacency and indifference to minority needs in modern digital societies. Communities around the globe united and won fundamental human rights through revolutions and independence movements. Inequity in socio-economic opportunities is an increasing concern when citizens access information and compare life styles across nations, marginalised minority groups empowered by recent political victories, organise uprisings against their autocratic and seemingly unjust regimes. Nowadays, as an outcome of substantial increases in trans-national migration, the marginalized sectors of the population are made up of minority groups who have sufficient numbers, the intellectual capacity and resources to demand for increases in socio economic rights. A just society averts unwarranted repercussions described above as the proverb forewarns,

“the night may be too long, but the day will surely come” ( Kiir, 2011)

The library as a public institution holds a vital role in building sustainable communities in Australia and globally. Using the public library is one the many strategies for building communities in multi ethnic Australia as shown by the findings of the project below,

“Communities are bound together by information and. more importantly by sharing information. Ultimately, people increase their sense of connectedness, and belonging to the community through sharing of local information” (People Together Project. 2000). The incident below is predictive of future strife between conflicting ethnic groups.

A typical of instance of ethnic conflict occurred at one of the public libraries located in Brisbane, Queensland, a state in the North Eastern part of Australia. The *Fabric of Holland Park* (Brisbane, Queensland) initiative represents how a single event can change both how community members deal with each other and how they see the public library as a community information sharing space. The event was staged by the public library to address conflict between two groups of newly arrived immigrants namely the Somalis and Sudanese. A Somali and a Sudanese had resorted to violence in the public library premises to resolve their personal ethnic differences which extended from their native villages to their adoptive country, Australia, The



*Fabric of Holland Park* event was organised by the local library working with the Community Development Branch. Since the library was seen as being part of the fabric of the community the event was based on fabric. As a result: "all the major ethnic groups in the community were invited to display fabrics from their culture in the library, and to set up food stalls in the park outside serving food and drinks. The local school organized performances of songs and dances and one hot Brisbane Saturday it all came together. The change in attitude was remarkable, and as a result of this one single event, a definite change was noted by library staff in the tolerance levels and in an enhanced sense of community harmony" (McKenzie, 2005).

The above shows ethnic conflict is carried across to the adoptive nation in this case Australia from their country of origin, but, a salient point of interest to library practitioners is the *imminent presence* of new arrivals in their premises and the need for their libraries to redefine services and programs to meet these new challenges.

## **KNOWLEDGE SEEKING IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT TENDENCIES IS DISCUSSED IN THE NEXT SECTION.**

Individuals are surrounded by family, community and government organisations, in order to function as a citizen the migrant is compelled to make decisions in seeking information about applying for welfare assistance and employment, search for on line enrolment of children in schools and so on for everyday living.

Brophy (2007) explains that,

"human activity is almost always a social process. We do not act, make decisions or learn in isolation but within a process of interplay between individuals collaborating or competing ...in the context of their users' and social environment" (Brophy, 2007, p.54).

Digital resources results in global systems such as the Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Google, WWW, Face Book, You Tube, Twitter, Data Bases Search Engines and the like influence these information services. Increasingly, individuals in the local community are unable to access services which are currently available to the public in digital modes. The public library is equipped with infrastructure and equipment to provide information, "within the normal living environment of its users" (Brophy, 2007, p.206), with no cost and in an informal mode. Thus, the library may need to carry out a user needs analysis to identify the level of computer literacy among its users.. The public library of the future is

potentially positioned to become the bridge between the knowledge seeker and the information. Personal computers may offer convenient access, but marginalized segments of the community are unable to access these mainly due to language barriers and lack of computer literacy.

Public libraries' access to Internet service providers and international network systems could be extended beyond the typical digital library services. Gone are the days of mere intermediary type service provision, the current environment heralds a new era for the future global library, beyond the limits of national boundaries with visions for even an international catalogues access such as the [www.biblitek.dk](http://www.biblitek.dk) a data base of *all libraries' (reference, public and special) collections* in Denmark! The WWW can be leveraged to develop world-wide library catalogues and multi lingual resources. Increased advocacy, government broader Broadband IT policy and collaboration across state, national and international organisations are predicted. Boundaries are limitless in the information highway, and roles are clearly undefined, besides, service providers and telecommunication corporations function as consumers too and are hold the rights to facilitate transnational, multilingual information networks (Brophy, 2007). Library users usually hold a diverse range of skills such as the computer savvy youth or the computer illiterate senior are two samples of the user population scenario. Individual skills or lack of skills are concerns of library professionals. Research shows that a collaborative project between the computer savvy and the computer illiterate resulted in remarkable community bonding (Audunson, 2005). Multi lingual access is inevitable in the future particularly in Western countries with substantial numbers of migrants. The multilingual library is showcased in the State Library of Victoria which worked on the principle that,

“the dream that any person can go into any public library and access online resources in any language”

This is the new aim of the *Open Road Project* in Victoria (Cuningham, 2004). The Project is funded by the State Library of Victoria and is

“an exploration of the nexus of electronic multicultural library services and community web publishing initiatives in community languages” (State Library Victoria, 2004-2008). It provides multilingual services to the general public, as well as conducting research into the provision of multilingual public Internet access; information literacy, information-seeking behaviour and information needs of migrants and refugees (State Library of Victoria, 2004-2008). Internet multilingual networks provide access to international digital resources such as ethnic newspapers, web sites, ethnic data bases, email and so

forth”(Cunnigham, 2004). Collaborations with service providers offer potential for world-wide partnerships with native language networks for multilingual library systems (Cunnigham, 2004 & Brophy, 2007).

The rationale that the public library has the potential to address some of the issues minority groups characteristically exhibit. Lack of attention by the hosts to integrate them as part of the mainstream community and introduce host values to replace the ones they bring will lead to segregation from the main society. The other aspect is access to community facilities so they can participate in society successfully despite the fact that the English language is the greatest barrier in Australia for integration.

Admittedly, public libraries were founded to serve information needs of principally mono linguistic cultures (Audunson, 2005). In the United Kingdom public libraries were established 150 years ago to reduce poverty and promote equity in the socio economic sectors, Pateman, (2004). The practice of the British public library system spread worldwide due to colonial influence and Australian libraries typically reflect the traditional role in serving English speaking Australians. The public library generally serves English speaking Western societies which are dominated by one cultural and scientific canon (Audunson, 2005 & Pateman, 2004).

Driven by personal needs, relying on the core values of librarianship, users across social class, age, ethnicity and intellect visit the public library (Audunson, 2005). Audunson (2005) asserts that public libraries represent a democratic institution that is more necessary now than it has ever been. New arrivals encounter an alien culture and change behaviours accordingly to face the social realities of survival in the new country.

Foremost, *intentions* shape behaviour (Karahanna, Evaristo & Srite, 2005). Intentions determined by *attitude* towards a decision to follow or not to follow a particular behaviour, for example, accessing the computer in the local library. Research findings explain that attitude (positive or negative) is an outcome of *cognitive* analysis which evaluates the value and consequences of behaviour. Additionally, people exhibit different levels of their culture of origin which is a reflection of their religion, language, or ethnicity (Karahanna, Evaristo & Srite 2005). Fundamentally, the researchers claim that a *social context* such as an ethnic festival predictably creates ethnic centred behaviours, while professional *skills or government or administrative offices* demand a more formal mode of behaviour. The agrarian and some illiterate migrants encounter many hurdles in the social context due to lack of English. The decision to access library programs is possibly driven by an

assessment of the benefits. Thus, the resources of public libraries can be leveraged to integrate ethnic minorities needs by providing training in English language skills, computer literacy skills, information on employment and ease them into mainstream culture. The interdependence between personal needs and outward orientated functions will increase cross cultural communications (Audunson, 2005).

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL ASPECTS ARE DISCUSSED BELOW.**

### **Dangers of bonding social capital**

Bonding social capital posits dangers for the community. Ethnic individuals are welcomed into ethnic organisations. Through self discrimination and the inability to adapt to the new environment in the host country, the new arrival opts for the familiar national culture over the unfamiliar host culture. The ethnic organisation through collective action organises social functions, communicates information on local government, welfare and administrative services, promotes niche economies (ethnic schools, religious centres, grocery shops, food outlets) and function within an inter play of openness and isolation. Dangers underpinning a bonding social capital include the rise of autonomous niche groups. Thus their transition into Australian culture is ethnically structured even though they obey Government rules. Ethnocentric sentiments limit long term social integration (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004).

Bridging social capital traits the researchers demonstrate, transcends social, political and cultural barriers and function with people unlike themselves (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004). Bridging individuals hold an open outlook, display values of trust, cooperation and build ties across groups. Overarching the two types of groups, is the self driven pursuits of seeking education , employment, welfare payments and other needs which compel interaction with government services. That is, inward orientated functions relate to outward orientated functions (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004). Indeed there is an interaction between the Australian host and ethnic culture. Additionally, the lack of money underpins the integration process, renders a financial disadvantage to many new migrants. While ethnic associations fulfil emotional needs, the government public spaces fulfil financial needs and hence function as compelling forces for integration.

Inclusive policies of the public libraries can be leveraged to promote the integration rationalized above.. The traditional dominant English speaking middle class service model can be redefined to reduce the cultural divide between ethnic minorities and the

Australian population. The mono cultural ethnic association and the traditional public library are encouraged to embrace cultural, linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity. Young and old ethnic individuals need finances, English language skills, educational qualifications, and computer skills. These can be offered by the library. Even though ethnic traditions and culture are retained, one has to succeed in the mainstream culture. The public library is positioned to target ethnic groups with inadequate language skills, the unemployed, and those who lack qualifications. In addition to organising programs, the library can function as a bridge between ethnic groups and mainstream services.. In particular, if the public library communicates with ethnic minority associations and utilise the skills of these individuals it is likely that the invisible barriers that hindered communication will be removed (Audunson, 2005).

Research shows that public libraries enhance literacy and improve human capital by facilitating life-long learning (Liu, 2004). Its role as an educational institution is evident in skills and educational levels of citizens in its community. Social capital in the form of highly educated individuals contributes indirectly to economic growth and posits a case for continued funding by stakeholders. (Liu, 2004). Research shows that the communities with access to libraries seem to display a higher standard of living.

In concluding, Wooden( 2006) states that the stage where debates on the legitimacy of the public library are long over, the immediate issues are provision of , diverse services and their value to users..

## **CONCLUSION**

In Western Australia, stereotype thinking dominates the public library scene. The Strategic Library Partnership Agreement Steering Committee held in February 2010 attended by 49 Metropolitan, 29 Country and 11 State Librarians, focused on funding and core public library services. The somewhat entrenched outlook appears limited in scope in the light of the current library environment. Skrzyszewski, concludes that “current multicultural library services are in a state of denial. Instead of looking forward [to] a sublime new vision, they focus on minimalism” (Skrzyszewski, 2004). Skrzyszewski refers to the situation in Canadian public libraries and maintains that the current complacency towards non English speaker user needs echoes the lack of interest among public libraries’ response to local population demographics. Undeniably, Western Australia could gain from public library best practices in Eastern (Queensland model is being looked at) seaboard and tap on the researches and initiatives by the public library

sector and stake holders (WALGA,2010). Critical to the success of public libraries is the need for reform as voiced in the SLWA Annual Report, by the Chief Executive Officer who states that, “the fundamentals of the West Australian public library system have remained unchanged since its development in the early 1950s and in the light of significant social and technological change, needs to be reformed if it is to continue to meet community expectations into the future” (Allen, 2009). Traditional practices that stem from long established library service operations, absence of change in thinking process by library personnel, and programs in place from historical times are likely hindrances as these targeted a mono cultural and non multicultural audience. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) added to the complacency towards multicultural library services by withdrawing its policy on multiculturalism in 2002. The ALIA claims that current policy statements meet multicultural needs and a separate policy is not essential despite increases in ethnic numbers (CASL, 2004). The lack of vision, united voice and national public policy means that public practices differ between LGAs, fragmented with agendas, funding dependent on “mercurial favour” of the elected state and local government members, and generally undervalued (Fullerton, 2009, Smith, 2004). There is a plea for a transparent policy involving State and Territories, LGA s and Federal government to acknowledge the value and the significant role of the nation’s public libraries. Smith (2004), states that, the service would be one of the largest, most inclusive and accessible community operations in the nation but this is not understood or recognised.

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